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AND THE FIGHT GOES ON


by Russell W. Gibbons

YANKEE Magazine: December, 1969

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shortly after the Civil War and ended in 1876. For three or four years, women reverted to straight, tight skirts, so tight it was difficult sometimes to walk. The bustle came back slowly and was reestablished by 1880. Like many fashions, the bustle became more extreme toward the end of its reign. By 1889 women were wearing "tea tray bustles." By 1890 the vogue had ended.

About the period when the Goodwin parlor was originally constructed, Mr. Callister said, there began a time of frankly erotic dress. In this period, dresses are pulled tight in front, emphasizing abdomen and breast. The bustle is, of course, an emphatic or symbolic female posterior.

Still paraphrasing the curator, social historians say that dress is one of the first things to change when mores change. In 1870, a million young men in Europe had lost their lives in comparatively recent wars. A million young women, then, were husband hunting. This is one possible explanation for the pronounced erotic style in dress. Paris was supreme in the fashion world and the leading couturier was Worth. According to one writer, Worth clothed every woman of the period who was "famous for wealth, birth, or scandal." The Englishman Worth believed that "one must be a man to know how to dress a woman," but in the English trade periodicals he was still being called "Worth the male milliner." It would not be correct, Mr. Callister said, "to believe that any designer has ever ruled the fashion world. The couturier does not create fashion, he 'senses' what women subconsciously want to wear."

This year the mannikins will again be dressed and arranged to represent Christmas in the Goodwin parlor. Standing at the barrier and looking into the room, it seems that 1870 has not disappeared forever below the horizon line. ♦♦



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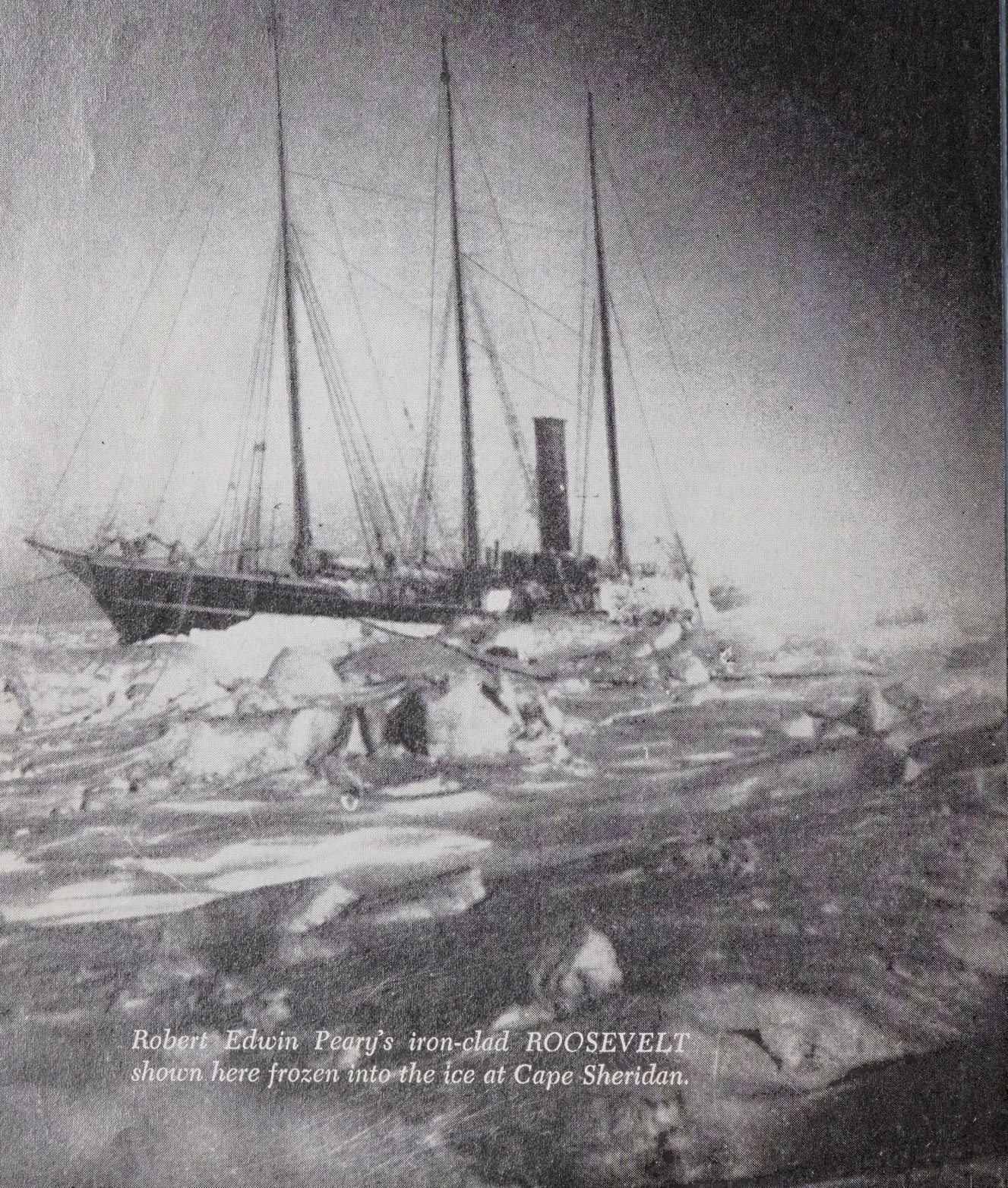
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*Robert Edwin Peary's iron-clad ROOSEVELT
shown here frozen into the ice at Cape Sheridan.*

fight goes on...

INTRODUCTION:

To be the first to achieve a geographical goal — first man to climb Mt. Everest, first ship to sail the Northwest Passage, first man on the moon, etc. — has always particularly inspired and motivated men. Sixty years ago, "the last great geographical prize" (on earth) was the North Pole. And the fact that two men claimed to be the first man to reach it instigated the greatest dispute ever to take place in the history of modern exploration and discovery. This year, additional controversy to the still-smoldering fight was sparked by the opinions of Ralph Plaisted, first to reach the Pole on a snowmobile, and Wally Herbert, commander of a recent British expedition to the Pole, as well as Theon Wright in his book, "The Big Nail," published two months ago. Accordingly, we asked Russell W. Gibbons to bring this tender subject up to date in the exclusive article for YANKEE which follows. Mr. Gibbons has written on the subject of American arctic exploration for the journals of the Stefansson Collection at Dartmouth College, the Department of Northern Affairs in Ottawa, and the Centre d'Etudes Arctiques in Paris.

by RUSSELL W. GIBBONS



According to the author, "it is still impossible to . . . disprove that either

■ THE SUMMER RESIDENTS IN THE popular Maine resort colony of Harpswell were preparing to close up their cottages and homes and journey back to Portland, Boston, and New York as the first day of September, 1909, arrived. But in Brooklyn, New York, Dr. Robert D. Davidson was frantic.

He held a brief, three-word cablegram from Copenhagen, Denmark, which said simply: SUCCESSFUL AND WELL. FRED. It was addressed to Mrs. Frederick A. Cook, a neighbor of the Davidsons on fashionable Bushwick Avenue in Brooklyn. Mrs. Cook was spending the



*Above: Robert Edwin Peary aboard the Roosevelt in 1908.
Left: Dr. Cook posed for this picture in the Antarctic in 1899.*

man (reached) the Pole in 1908 or 1909”

summer in South Harpswell and Dr. Davidson was at first unable to locate her.

By the time Mrs. Cook was located in Harpswell, other cables from Copenhagen had inevitably made her the center of attention by both the press and the public. Her husband, a

44-year-old physician with an itch to climb mountains and explore the uttermost polar caps of the earth, had not been heard from since March, 1908, when a small support party of Eskimos had left his expedition near the frozen shores of Axel Heiberg (continued on next page)



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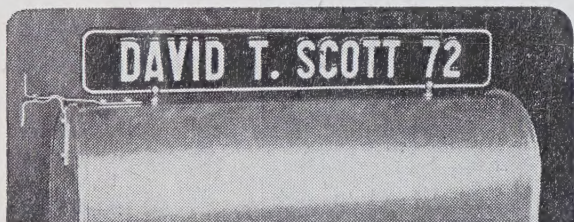
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For the physician-explorer's wife, the message contained all she need know, and ended a tense wait of the 1909 summer. Earlier in the year she had sold their Brooklyn home to raise money for a relief party to be sent to the Far North under the command of the Canadian explorer, Capt. J. E. Bernier. If she did not have any message from her husband by September, Marie Cook was prepared to accept the fact that he must have perished on the windswept polar ice.

The other message from Copenhagen was to electrify the world: REACHED NORTH POLE APRIL 21, 1908. The entire front page of the New York *Herald* was given to Dr. Cook's account of how he had planted the American flag at the top of the world, the first man to conquer a Pole of the earth. In Europe, both royalty and scientists were preparing to honor the American doctor, who had made his way back from northern Greenland by a Danish ship.

The excitement was the greatest that the Harpswell community had experienced since it became a turn-of-the-century favorite for summer residents, along with nearby Bailey and Orr's Island (the latter familiar to many as the scene of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *The Pearl of Orr's Island*). Yet the drama that was to begin here would soon have another chapter, and it would be played out only a few miles from the place where Mrs. Cook received her message.

As Mrs. Cook made her way back to Brooklyn with her small daughters, Helene and Ruth, another explorer's wife waited at her home on Eagle Island, watching the waters of Casco Bay crash against the rugged shore of the Harpswell peninsula. The news of Dr. Cook's triumph must have reacted much as the ocean breaking on the rocks for Josephine Peary, for her husband had also set out in quest of the North Pole in July of the year previous. It was the "last great geographical prize" to be attained by man, Robert Edwin Peary had declared. Yet no word had been heard

from him since his ship, the iron-clad *Roosevelt*, had been frozen into the ice at Cape Sheridan almost a year ago.

It would not be until the weekend that Jo Peary would herself get a message. On Monday, a newspaperman from Portland rowed out to the island, which is two miles off the Harpswell coast. He told Mrs. Peary that her husband had arrived in Indian Harbour, Labrador, and had telegraphed to the world I HAVE THE POLE, APRIL 6, 1909. Coming as it did on top of the Cook message, and cautious because of the many rumors circulating, Mrs. Peary was skeptical. "Well, I'm not going to celebrate. If he has reached the North Pole I'll get a message."

She did not have long to wait. Her daughter, Marie (the "Snowbaby," so dubbed because she had been the first white girl born above the Arctic Circle, on one of her father's earlier Greenland expeditions), was announcing the arrival of yet another boat at the Eagle Island dock. It turned out to be Arthur Palmer, who ran the general store in South Harpswell and who also doubled as unofficial telegraph messenger, and with whom Jo Peary had made arrangements to deliver any word immediately.

Now there was no question. HAVE MADE GOOD AT LAST. I HAVE THE POLE. AM WELL, it declared, signed, BERT.

Within another few days, the rivalry which had existed between two members of the small exploration fraternity exploded into a bitter controversy which has since been recognized as the greatest dispute ever to take place in the history of modern exploration and discovery. The Great North Pole Feud, which would wax hot until America's entrance into World War I, was destined to affect the lives of many, among them the families of the two arctic explorers who were spending that fateful Maine summer at the tip of the Harpswell perimeter. There would be those who would say later that it brought about an early death for Robert E. Peary; but without a doubt it cast a shadow upon

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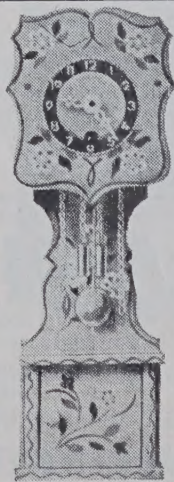
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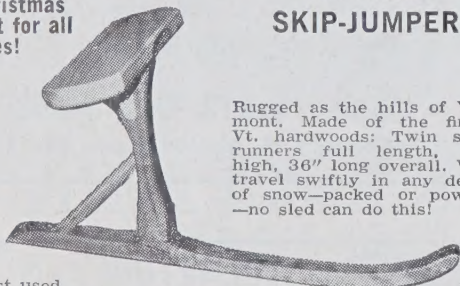
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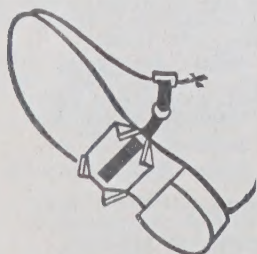
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the lives of Marie Cook and her children, who unknowingly were taking a train not only back to Brooklyn and eventual reunion with husband and father but into a bitter sea of controversy which eventually would force them to flee the country.

Last September marked the 60th anniversary of the rival announcements of the prior attainment of the North Pole. The Great North Pole Feud has died down, at times flared up again, but it has never been laid to rest. Polar scientists and geographers, armchair explorers and modern ice travelers who have reached the mythical pinpoint on the top of the moving Arctic Ocean that was the passion which lured Cook and Peary have all entered the fray. Opinions have been made, judgments offered, and encyclopedias revised, but after half a century it is still impossible to prove or disprove that either man was in reasonable proximity to the geographical North Pole in 1908 or 1909.

What has emerged is a set of circumstantial evidence which has been propagated by the advocates of either a Cook or a Peary priority, leaving the controversy in the same limbo of uncertainty. Peary's protagonists have been many and influential, and they have been successful in obtaining for the career naval engineer a qualified acceptance in the geographies, reference works, and archives of the United States. Dr. Cook has, over the years, been consigned to a disparaging footnote in books on polar exploration; but in recent years he has fared better at the hands of arctic ex-



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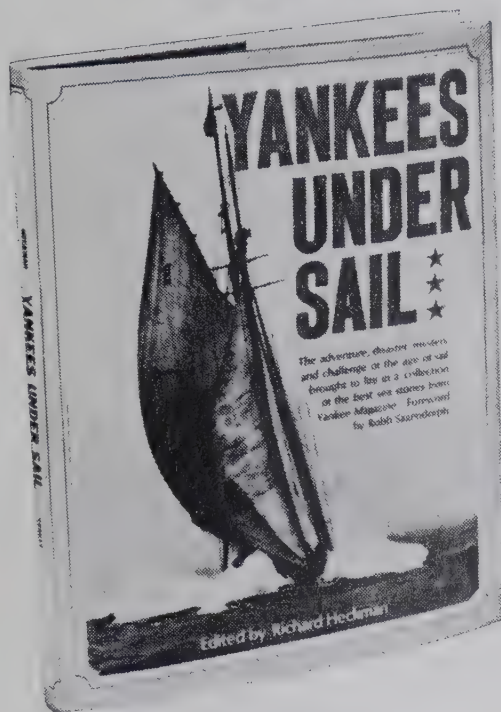
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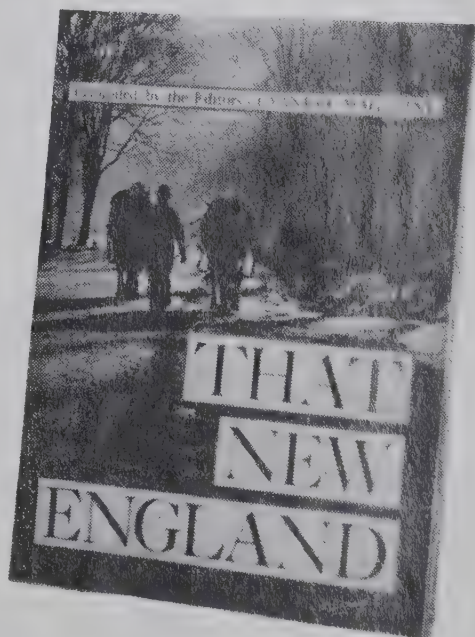
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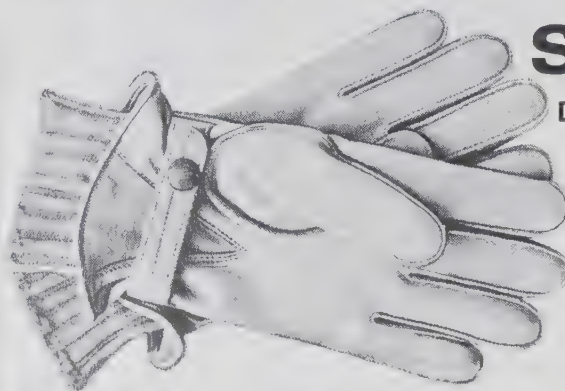
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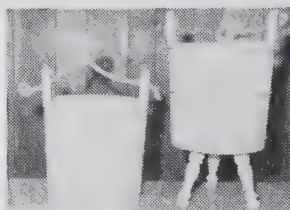
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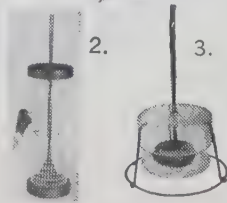
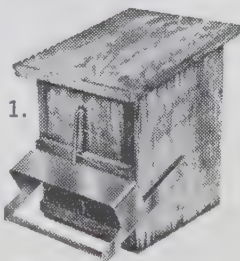
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plorers and historians in Canada and Europe, where many observers had looked with horror upon the controversy as "a dismal and undignified episode."

The controversy was revived recently when two men who had led undisputed over-ice expeditions to the Pole—the first since Cook and Peary—offered their own opinions. Ralph Plaistead, who reached the Pole by snowmobile, expressed his doubt that Peary had made it. And Wally Herbert, the British commander of a four-man party that completed the first trans-Arctic walk over the polar ice cap from Alaska to Spitzbergen via the Pole, suggested that Cook's pioneer account was credible.

Author-explorer Theon Wright may have heated it up further with the recent publication of his book, *The Big Nail* (Greenland Eskimos envisioned the "Pole" the white man sought as a huge iron spike driven into the crust of the earth). His review of the feud has been like a historical detective story—seeking to reconstruct both the rival quests for the Pole and the subsequent controversy. "No reasonable solution to the mystery could be arrived at," Wright declares, "without an understanding of motivating factors—the psychology of the two men—that controlled their behavior."

His conclusions may only bring additional controversy to the smouldering dispute, but they have offered a fresh perspective in which to judge the merits of the two accounts. It is also necessary to recall the climate in the United States as that first decade of this century was drawing to a close. While as a nation America had not yet attained world leadership stature, it was moving in that direction. The Great White Fleet had sailed around the world, President Theodore Roosevelt had announced his "big stick" diplomacy, and a young, surging nation fresh from the first taste of world imperialism in a quick and "splendid" Spanish-American War now sought additional world attention and recognition.

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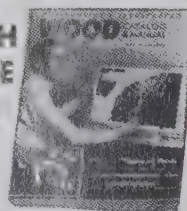
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cans would see extension of this greatness a symbolic act of planting the Stars and Stripes at the top of the world. Robert E. Peary had been told that he was the "man for the job" by no less than T.R. himself, who came aboard the *Roosevelt* at Oyster Bay as it sailed for the Arctic on Peary's last expedition. "Bully for Peary!" was T.R.'s benediction. "He was not merely a product of this era of arrogance," Wright declares, "he was a personification of it!"

Cook could not have been a more contrasting rival for the race to the Pole. He was unassuming, a doctor afield who was comfortable in the company of both sophisticated men of finance or the savage "Arctic Highlanders" of northernmost Greenland. That he was unprepared to wage combat in the ruthless era of circulation journalism which characterized pre-World War I American opinion-making was soon apparent when Peary's friends assaulted not only the story of his prior polar attainment, but his character and integrity. The result was that in the minds of many Americans he was at best a confused romantic, at worst a geographic charlatan and monumental hoaxer.

Actually, their early lives had many parallels. Peary was born in Cresson, Pennsylvania, in 1856, later moving to Maine with his widowed mother and attending Bowdoin College at Brunswick. As a boy he sailed Casco Bay and explored Eagle Island, determining that one day he would own it and build his own home facing the Atlantic storms. Becoming a civil engineer with the U.S. Navy, he went to Nicaragua on two canal surveys and made his first voyage to the Arctic in 1886. The conquest of the North Pole soon became a personal manifest destiny, telling T.R. as he left on his last expedition that "this was the work for which God Almighty intended me."

Cook was nine years Peary's junior, born in the Catskills hamlet of Calicoon, in 1865. His father, a German immigrant physician who served in the

Civil War, died when he was five and the family moved to Brooklyn. Cook worked his way through the College of Physicians and Surgeons at New York University and went to the Arctic with Peary for the first time in 1891. Later he wintered in the Antarctic, thus becoming the first American to be an active explorer of both polar regions. Yet he was the antithesis of early 20th century American expansionism: trusting, naive in many respects, he lived outside the "establishment" of his day. "He represented no great body of savants and no consortium of wealthy interests," writes Canadian author Farley Mowat, "his methods were insultingly simple and he represented the wrong set of values."

The bitter brawl over the North Pole began with Peary's famous cablegram, after he was urged to challenge Cook's priority: "he has handed the public a gold brick!" The controversy went into an initial heated war of words with the rival New York *Times* (Peary) and *Herald* (Cook) providing a daily diet of defamation. Geographic societies awarded gold medals to both claimants and the University of Copenhagen announced it would rule on Cook's records. The doctor lost the first round when the university announced a "not proven" verdict, but Cook supporters pointed out that they had not rescinded their medal and honorary degree awarded for the attainment, and Peary's records had not been given a scientific scrutiny.

Historians generally acknowledge that the hapless Cook was the victim of a well-managed press campaign, which included a forged confession published in an article under his name in the widely circulated *Hampton's* magazine. He was hounded to South America and Europe with his family in 1910-11 but returned to press his claims for priority discovery of the Pole with publication of his book (*My Attainment of the Pole*; Peary's was *The North Pole*) and a lecture circuit on the Chautauqua. While several German geographers and many prominent polar explorers, including Roald Amund-

sen, supported him, he failed to convince American scientific opinion. While the public was sympathetic, the renewed controversy was eclipsed by American entry into the European war and the congressional investigation sought by Cook backers was dropped.

"There are those who believe that such an investigation might have turned out in Cook's favor," writes McGill University geography professor Trevor Lloyd, "and might also have thrown considerable doubt on Peary's claims, although Cook himself never challenged them." Characteristically, Cook advised Congress that he had no objections to a bill to retire Peary from Navy service with a Rear Admiralty and pension for his polar journey. Congress, however, refused to cite Peary as the "discoverer" of the Pole.

The controversy hurt Peary deeply, and he refused many public appearances because he felt that his work had been not only rejected but questioned. Once he had stalked out of a public lecture in a church near Pittsburgh when Dr. Cook confronted him on the stage. With his family he sought refuge on Eagle Island. It was, indeed, the "Promised Land" he had often described: the Atlantic wind would whip the Casco Bay waters into a choppy sea, which would smash against the rocky promontory on the island's northerly point, where he had built the home of his boyhood dreams. A superb view of the Atlantic was offered from the living room, which was replete with the trophies of Peary's generation of arctic travels—polar bear rugs, foxskins, mounted heads of bear, seal, musk ox.

There, on their beloved Eagle Island, Peary and his family spent the last summer together in 1919. A few months later he would be dead at 64. The public debate may or may not have hastened his death, but Peary wrote during the controversy of the "... nightmare of misrepresentation, animosity, insult and now of wrangling and haggling" which made the acclaim he believed he should have enjoyed an anticlimatic thing. Of

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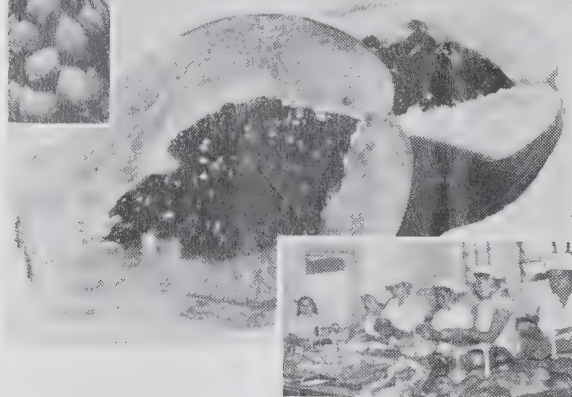
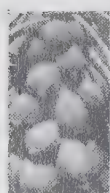
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Cook he would not speak, although his former shipmate and fellow explorer had fallen upon bad times. The doctor was to outlive Peary by 20 years, never to renounce his conviction that he had been the first to reach the Pole—fully one year before his rival claimant to discovery.

Cook's wanderlust precluded any personal refuge on the Maine coast or anywhere else. He went on expeditions to Borneo and the Himalayas, became a geologist in Wyoming, and was involved in oil promotion in Texas. Here, in 1923, he was convicted of using the mails to promote questionable oil stock and subsequently spent seven years in prison. (Ironically, his "worthless oil lands" turned into gushers during the years he spent in Leavenworth.) A few months before he died, President Franklin Roosevelt granted him an unconditional pardon. Ironical also is the fact that while Cook was in Leavenworth prison the first of several European atlases and books on polar history were published, acknowledging his priority of discovery.

The relics of the rival polar conquests and of the explorers themselves are scattered throughout the northeastern states, many of them in New England. Peary was buried in Arlington National Cemetery, where a massive stone globe marks his grave. In a niche at historic Forest Lawn Cemetery in Buffalo, New York, the ashes of Dr. Cook may be found with some of the medals awarded him for his expeditions. A heroic life-sized statue of Peary with an Eskimo dog stands in a park near his birthplace at Cresson. In 1965, on the occasion of the centenary of Cook's birth, the town fathers in Calicoon erected a simple state marker on his birthsite, with the cautious inscription "Pioneer American Explorer, Arctic and Antarctic."

The Peary homestead on Eagle Island has been given to the State of Maine as a historic site, where his possessions will be on display in a permanent museum. A few miles north, at Peary's Alma Mater, Bowdoin College has established

the Peary-MacMillan Arctic Museum, where other mementos of their expeditions may be seen. Donald B. MacMillan, another Bowdoin graduate, was with Peary on his last expedition and later became a polar explorer in his own right. Still erect at 94, "Mac" lives in the home in which he was born—at Provincetown, Massachusetts. The museum at the foot of the Pilgrim Memorial there contains additional arctic memorabilia. The last survivor of the Peary expedition is still bitter about the Cook claim: he wrote to officials in New York State four years ago protesting the legislative resolution which had memorialized the physician-Pole claimant born in the Catskills.

Another famed adopted son of New England has established the most extensive library and center of polar archives in the United States at Hanover, New Hampshire. There, in famous Baker Memorial Library on the Dartmouth campus, the collection of the late Vilhjalmur Stefansson has many of the papers and documents tracing the Cook-Peary confrontation. He was the last of the classic arctic explorers, who used dogs and sleds to extend the map and the limits of human knowledge in the Far North.

The New England seafaring tradition had played an important part in the American story of exploration and discovery of the frozen High Arctic. Beginning with Dr. Elisha Kent Kane and Isaac Hayes, Charles Francis Hall and Gen. A. W. Greeley, through the Cook and Peary era, Boston and Gloucester seamen have manned the ships and charted them through the treacherous ice floes that have been the graveyard for countless expeditions.

History is not the exclusive province of the historians, and it may be that, as Oscar Wilde instructs, the only duty we have to it is to rewrite it. Whatever the final verdict in the court of historical geography, they will still be able to record that this greatest controversy in the annals of exploration began at that unlikely setting in South Harpswell 60 years ago. ◆◆



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■ ALTHOUGH WE HAD BEEN IN MOULTONBORO and in Wolfeboro, New Hampshire, many times, we had never taken Route 109 between the two until this fall, when Mrs. Katherine B. Gillett of Sanbornville told us a good deal about The Hansel and Gretel Shop in Melvin Village—which lies about half way between the above-mentioned 'boros—and we went by for a visit too. A lollypop fence surrounding the "Witch's House" is the eye-catcher here, and the motif is repeated around a fishin' pool within the shop.

The Witch's House, shaped like an old-fashioned corn crib, was the first shop unit constructed when Mr. and Mrs. Donald Wright began business some 16 years ago. In only a couple of years, this area became too small and the Wrights themselves needed a place to live. A home was built to the rear of the Witch's House—with shop expansion in mind; in a year, even this planned expansion proved inadequate and the entire front part of the house became shop. Don Wright built a bridge from the newly expanded shop to the Witch's House, and excavated a shallow pool under it.

This outdoor pool was "stocked" with plastic fish and a child could "rent" a rod and reel. When he hooked a fish and brought it to the checkout counter, he received a prize. Now the pool, relocated within-doors, serves in a similar way.

Until about three years ago The Hansel and Gretel Shop was strictly a family business. As they grew up, the Wrights' three daughters worked in the shop during summer vacations. One year, Wendy, the oldest, designed and made an attractive line of dresses for girls and young women. Following that she studied in Paris and has now gone on to her own career as fashion designer. Noel was cashier, and Kathleen handled the candy department. Now Noel is married, and Kathleen is in college, but spends her summer vacations as stock clerk. Young women from Melvin Village help out during July and August—the months when the shop is open from ten o'clock in the morning to ten o'clock at night, seven days a week. From Labor Day until the day before Christmas it is open only during the day. On Christmas Day, The Hansel and Gretel Shop closes and the Wrights take a much-needed vacation. But by April 19 the shop is opened again for weekends till May 30, when it reopens for full day-time hours.

At the present time, the little old Witch's House is just another room of the main shop. In fact, several attractively arranged little rooms open off a plaza around the pool, each with its own specialty, to form "a village" of shops.

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